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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: NEPAL'S MAIN OPPOSITION PARTIES MERGE, BUT REMAIN
IN THE MINORITY

Putting the U Back in UML

1. (U) Nepal's main opposition party, the Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist and Leninist (UML), merged February 15 with a smaller former offshoot, the Communist Party of Nepal - Marxist-Leninist (ML). (Note: The combined parties will continue to use the UML name. Although communist by name, these parties more closely resemble European social-democratic parties. UML leaders claim to be even more democratic than the ruling Nepali Congress, which in the UML view remains feudal, nepotistic and corrupt. End Note.)

The Minority's Minority No More

2. (SBU) In 1998, friction between leading figures in the UML came to a head when UML parliamentarians opposed to the Mahakali Treaty with India broke ranks and formed the ML. Although the ML garnered six percent of the votes in the 1999 general election - making it the third largest party in terms of the popular vote - it was unable to win any seats in Parliament. Efforts at reunification began a year later, when the ML leadership saw that, as a former minority in a minority party, they had made no inroads with a platform only slightly to the left of the well-established UML. The head of the UML's foreign department expressed hopes that the reunified UML could win a majority in the next national elections, slated for 2004.

Comment

3. (SBU) The history of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) has, since its founding in 1949, been a story of schisms, factions, and (occasional) reunifications. Two of the main Maoist leaders, Prachanda and Baburam Bhattarai, both founded their own schismatic CPN franchises in 1994, and two years later merged them into the Maoist movement currently menacing the nation. (Note: According to UML leader Madhav Nepal, since the Maoists' insurgency began at least 45 CPN-UML cadres have died at the hands of the Maoists.) While the UML reunification was formalized February 15, many assignments in the new party leadership have yet to be made. The centripetal trend behind the UML-ML merger stems in part from increasing frustration over Nepal's security and economic problems, but also because many ambitious CPN leaders dislike being left out in the cold.

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